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## County cracks down on drunken drivers

By: GIG CONAUGHTON - Staff Writer

SAN DIEGO ---- San Diego County probation officers and Escondido police officers kicked off a crackdown on drunken drivers Thursday night, staging surprise searches of the homes of dozens of offenders on probation in a hunt for booze, drugs, or other violations.

Gonzalo Mendez, a longtime member of the county's Probation Department, and head of the new state-funded program, said its goal was simple ---- to save or change lives. The program aims to find, arrest and jail people who show signs they could drink and drive again, putting their own lives and those of potential victims at risk.

When county supervisors approved the new program in June, officials said statistics reported that roughly 25 percent of all people arrested for drunken driving are repeat offenders.

Some may find the new program controversial because its unannounced searches could be seen as an invasion of privacy.

But Mendez and Vince Iaria, head of the county's Probation Department, said they have no concerns ---- legal, moral or otherwise.

The program, they say, will be aimed at the "worst of the worst" offenders. Felony drunken drivers who have multiple offenses, who have hurt others and who have waived their constitutional protections to "unreasonable" searches as conditions of probation in order to stay out of jail.

To be convicted of felony drunken driving, a person has to have had at least four drunken-driving convictions in a seven-year span. Or, Mendez said, a person would have had to be convicted of driving drunk in an accident in which they injured or killed someone, or where they tried to escape and led arresting officers on a high-speed chase.

"It's pretty serious stuff," Mendez said.

Kevin Keenan, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of San Diego and Imperial Counties, said constitutional-rights watchdogs could offer little argument against the program.

"In a perfect world, there would be a better balance of privacy rights, even for people who are on probation," Keenan said. "But the fact is, they've been sentenced and found guilty and are only on probation ... because they've signed away search rights to (get) out of being locked up."

San Diego County's roughly \$1 million program, funded by a portion of a \$5 million, two-year state grant, kicked off in earnest Thursday night with a raid of XXX homes in Escondido. Sixteen other California counties are also getting portions of the \$5 million grant to run their own programs.

Mendez said the county used part of its grant money to create a nine-person team of probation officers who will track about 400 to 500 people convicted of felony drunken driving but given probation ---- out of the pool of roughly 1,500 people arrested for driving under the influence each year.

State officials from California's office of traffic safety said the grant funding was unprecedented and long overdue.

Traffic safety officials said the fight to slash drunken driving injuries and deaths was a success in the 1980s and early 1990s, thanks to increased scrutiny and prosecution, and tougher DUI laws and sentencing.

But the numbers of arrests and deaths have been on the rise since 2000.

The Department of Motor Vehicles is the agency that tracks statistics on drunken driving. It reported in its 2006 annual study that alcohol-related deaths increased in 2004 ---- the latest statistical information available. Those figures reported that 1,460 people were killed statewide, including 115 in San Diego County.

Officials said alcohol-related deaths declined in California for more than 10 consecutive years until beginning to rise in 1999.

The motor vehicle study also reported that DUI arrests, and drunken-driving related injuries increased in 2004.

Mendez, meanwhile knows only too well the heartache that drunken driving can cause.

On July 4, 2000, a drunken driver killed Mendez's only brother.

In March, another drunken driver killed another of Mendez's relatives ---- a father figure he had known for more than 20 years.

"When I found out he was a repeat drunk driver, my blood boiled," Mendez said. "I felt like, 'What in the world is going on with these people?' "

Now he finds himself in charge of a program that will be knocking on the doors of drunken drivers around the county in the hope of conducting "pre-emptive strikes" to make sure others don't feel his pain.

But he said he didn't come to this point easily.

Mendez said that when his only brother, Carlos Mendez, was killed six years ago by a drunken driver in Mexico, he was shattered.

"For several years, I didn't feel like I could talk about it," he said.

Mendez said he had spent recent years supervising sex offenders, but helped write the grant application for the new drunken-driving program when the state offered cash to finance it.

But he was still unsure whether he wanted to ask permission to manage the program.

Then, a drunken driver killed another of Mendez's relatives in March, plowing into 62-year-old Ramon Ulloa as he was driving home from Costco.

"I knew him for over 20 years," he said. "He was like a father figure to me. That made it real easy for me to make that decision (to apply)."

Even so, Mendez said he isn't intent on punishment ---- he believes the program can prevent drunken drivers from killing somebody else. But he said the program may also rehabilitate the lives of those felony drunken drivers, even if it sends them back to jail.

"Maybe it will be that wake-up call that makes them say, 'Oh my God, I've got to take this seriously,' " Mendez said. "When I went to that sentencing (for Ulloa's killer), he spoke before the court. He looked like he could have been my best friend. He had a good job. But the reality is he made a bad decision.

"We're helping them (drunken drivers) out," Mendez said. "I don't want these people on my caseload to drive and kill somebody. The point is, we've got to get the message out: Don't drink and drive."

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